

# Early Shakespeare

Reviewed by Richard M. Waugaman and  
Elisabeth P. Waugaman

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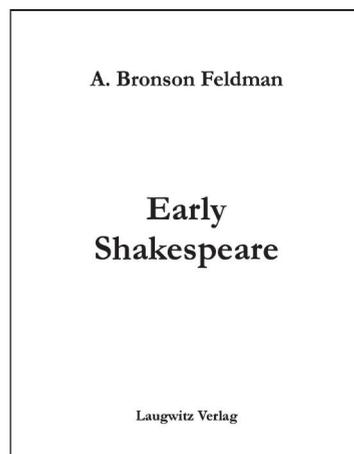
Early Shakespeare. By Bronson Feldman. Edited by Warren Hope. Buchholz, Germany: Laugwitz Verlag, 2019. 573 pages. (Kindle Edition \$7.99).  
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Abraham Bronson Feldman (1914-1982) was fortunate in his friends for they ensured his 1977 mimeographed book, *Hamlet Himself*, was finally published in 2010. Feldman planned to publish the present book in 1982—a quarter of it was in galley proofs—but his death that year prevented him from doing so. We are therefore indebted to Warren Hope for seeing this book to publication, and to Dr. Uwe Laugwitz and his publishing firm for making it available.

Any review of the book has to bear in mind that not only was Feldman unable to revise the manuscript, but his editor had no authorial feedback as to how to revise it, leading to much repetitiousness. Like Turkey's Meander River, Feldman wanders—from one fascinating idea to another. Feldman sometimes lapses into a flippant tone in describing traditional scholars and the merchant Shakspere, which detracts from his invaluable book. Descending to tit for tat, rather than relying on the evidence, is not a good strategy in academics.

Feldman lets well-researched historical events guide his narration. This historical lens provides more information than readers interested primarily in the plays will need. The sheer volume of historical information Feldman refers to is amazing, often based on his archival investigations. But it can



sometimes overwhelm the reader, especially considering that he wrote this book before most of these historical sources were readily available. Because Feldman lets history be his guide in his commentary on the plays, the reader is presented with a vast amount of history that Feldman eventually connects with the plays, so that the plays become secondary to the historical details. If Feldman wrote his book primarily for historians who specialize in the topics he covers, there would be no problem. But if he wrote it for general readers, it is another matter. He seemed to write primarily for fellow Oxfordians, who do not need to be convinced that Oxford wrote Shakespeare. Orthodox scholars should therefore begin with other books, such as those by Mark Anderson, Joseph Sobran, and Richard Whalen. If Feldman had let the plays be his guide, filling in the history as needed rather than vice versa, a better balance between the two would have been maintained.

Feldman earned his Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Pennsylvania, with a dissertation on Tudor drama. Feldman makes many cogent observations about Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Burghley; one of Feldman's teachers wrote a biography of Burghley. After his later training as a clinical psychoanalyst, Feldman combined an academic career with practicing psychoanalysis. He published at least eight articles on Shakespeare in psychoanalytic journals, and a total of roughly 100 articles in all. To our knowledge, he was the first psychoanalyst to take seriously Freud's suggestion that we re-examine Shakespeare's works with the knowledge that they were written by Oxford. That is just what he does with Shakespeare's first ten plays in the present book (hence the title). For example, he plausibly speculates that Oxford "conducted himself as if he moved perpetually before a mirror or a proscenium" (174), always ready to transmute his life into art. He seems put off by Oxford's gargantuan narcissism, which is understandable.

Reviewing Feldman's 1959 book *The Unconscious in History for The Psychoanalytic Review*,<sup>1</sup> Edmund Weil said "Dr. Feldman is a genuine liberal with great erudition in the fields of history, philology, political economy, and psychoanalysis [not to mention Shakespeare]" (126). Weil understates, if anything, Feldman's prodigious scholarship in an unusually wide variety of fields. As a result, Feldman can make connections that would elude others. For example, he helps illuminate Oxford's "conversation" with the many classical sources of his early plays.

Although Feldman became an Oxfordian at age 18, and his openly Oxfordian articles date back as early as 1947, he had to suppress his heretical authorship opinion to get some of his work published in mainstream journals. Unfortunately, this is a familiar story. For example, B.M. Ward's publisher would not allow him to voice his opinion that Oxford wrote Shakespeare in his biography

of Oxford in 1928. Some of us still publish in mainstream journals under the implicit or explicit understanding that we will censor our authorship views.

How did these restrictions affect Feldman's writings? In his first chapter, he says "I intend to steer clear of questions of biography" (12). He thus misses an opportunity to link a passage he quotes from *Comedy of Errors* with a 1576 letter from Oxford to Burghley. Erotes says "He that commands me to *mine own content*/ Commends me to the thing I cannot get" (I.2.33-34). In Oxford's angry 1576 letter, he notoriously stated, "For always I have, and will still, prefer *mine own content* before others'..." That phrase will not appear in EEBO until 1588—yet another example of a striking parallel between Oxford's letters and Shakespeare's works.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 is openly Oxfordian and speculates that Oxford wrote "The History of Error," performed at court in 1577. This chapter offers fascinating parallels between details of the plot and Oxford's life experiences. As convincing as many of Feldman's surmises are here, he mistakes some of his speculations for facts—e.g., "Beyond question, he failed" (68). That is, Oxford failed to have the "adultery of his dreams" in Venice, and secretly converted to Catholicism out of guilt, since the woman he had sex with stood for his mother. Really? Throughout the book, Feldman alternates between such grating false certainty and more modestly convincing surmises.

Sometimes it is a bit confusing for an Oxfordian reader, not knowing if Feldman is truly linking the life of William Shakspeare with a given play, or if he is cleverly speaking of Shakspeare in a sort of code that really refers to Oxford (e.g., "after the unjust divorce of his wife," 48). Our own experience is that some of our thinking about links with Oxford becomes blunted when we are not allowed to express such thoughts in print.

And what of Feldman's psychoanalytic perspective? What does it contribute to our understanding of Oxford's works? More than anything else, it restores the inherent psychoanalytic interest in the particular life story that lies behind given works of literature. This should be a no-brainer for psychoanalysts, but our profession has been remarkably submissive to "authority" in accepting the traditional author, despite the glaring inconsistencies between his documented life and the Shakespeare canon. Beyond this fundamentally vital use of a psychoanalytic perspective, Feldman's particular analytic theories as they are applied to the works will appeal to some readers more than to others. He was a product of his time, when analysts tended to make authoritative pronouncements about unconscious meanings, claims that today may seem too theory-driven, rather than evidence-driven (e.g., "My replies to these problems, to which our analysis *inevitably* leads..." [46; our emphasis]). Yet Feldman makes plausible formulations when he speculates about ways in

which Oxford used his plays to help acknowledge and try to understand his personal—and public—foibles.

Feldman received his analytic training from Theodore Reik, a brilliant, intuitive follower of Freud (his 1948 book, *Listening with the Third Ear*, remains popular). Reik himself had a strong interest in literature—his psychology Ph.D. dissertation was on Flaubert, and his 1952 book *The Secret Self* consisted of literary criticism of Shakespeare and other writers. Feldman departs from his Reik in using academically inflected jargon, which can be off-putting (e.g., “the paternal ganglion of his superego,” 47; “paternal procreant,” 300; “egolatry,” 308; “manustrupation,” 358; “attempted to sever her virgin zone,” 372; “collegiate craniums,” (for Stratfordian scholars, repeatedly). Reik could use his patients’ reactions to his intuitive interpretations to test their validity; Feldman had no such checks on his intuitions about Shakespeare.

I think of an eloquent warning offered in 1959 by Gordon R. Smith of Penn State’s English department. He prophetically predicted the declining prestige of psychoanalytic studies of literature: “But of psychoanalytic approaches to literature in general, I’d like to emphasize that analysis is an exceedingly sharp knife: like a scalpel in the hands of an anatomist, it can reveal concealed structure or destroy it, as the user pays heed to his material or ignores it and hacks away. The latter kind of analysis is not an interdisciplinary contribution: *it’s a raid into foreign territory which may only become more hostile to psychoanalysis the oftener such raids occur*” (227-28; emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

Feldman cites Eva Turner Clark as often as he cites Looney, usually in agreement. But when his opinion differs from hers, he claims that “she sadly erred” (374 and elsewhere), rather than admit more humbly that their opinions differ. We were pleased that he cites the anonymous poem, “A Letter written by a young gentlewoman” (215). He discovered that this poem was about Oxford’s trip to Italy, and his wife’s reactions to it. However, he fails to consider the possibility that the poem was written by Oxford himself (cf. Waugaman, 2015).<sup>4</sup> There are other anonymous or possibly allonymous works that he mentions, without considering the possibility that they may have been written by “early” Oxford (e.g., *The Arte of English Poesie*; the “Golding” translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; the commentaries of “E.K.” in Spenser’s *The Sheepherd’s Calendar*).

Feldman not only relates characters in the play to actual historical figures, but also provides, at times, startling analysis of subliminal messages the plays present in an era of extreme censorship. In the King of Navarre’s search for scholarship as opposed to valor in *Loves Labors Lost*, Feldman sees one of the earliest English endeavors “for the principles of freedom from both church and state” (336). Feldman continues to trace the theme of secrecy

and lying throughout the play, thus highlighting the play's subversive dimension: the battle against suppression (377-378).

Feldman also masterfully describes the relationship of various authors to Oxford and gives credit to French academics, which is rarely done in Shakespeare studies. He notes that the French scholar Albert Feuillerat was among the first to observe the important literary influence of Oxford's literary circle on John Lyly (351) as well as noting multiple links with Philip Sidney. Feldman also refers to the vast erudition of Abel Lefranc's study of Shakespeare's plays.

In discussing *Berowne*, Feldman artfully moves from the historical French character to the English character he alludes to between the lines—i.e., Oxford. Feldman further notes that the French princess has qualities that bring to mind Queen Elizabeth herself, so that the play reflects not only what is happening in the French court, but also what is happening in the Elizabethan court—a mirroring that Shakespeare employs throughout his plays because the history, culture, and language of the two countries are so intertwined, in an ongoing love-hate relationship that continues to this very day. Feldman introduced us to wonderful comments by Walter Pater about “something of self-portraiture” in some of Shakespeare's characters,” with *Berowne* in *LLL* being “perhaps the most striking of this group” (361). He cites a similar comment by Coleridge.

Feldman regrets our relative neglect of the connections between music and Shakespeare. He quotes John Farmer's moving dedication of his 1599 madrigal collection to Oxford. I wish Feldman could have known that Farmer's use of the word “outstrip[ped]” in this dedication was one of the first uses of the word in EEBO; the very first was in the 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that some of us believe is the work of Oxford.

Despite a plethora of historical information that can at times overwhelm the subject matter of the plays and a somewhat eccentric tone, Bronson Feldman's *Early Shakespeare* is an invaluable addition to the study of Shakespeare's plays and understanding their historical and literary context. Oxfordians will be in Warren Hope's debt for this valuable resource.

## Endnotes

1. *The Psychoanalytic Review*. 47A:1:126–127, 1960.
2. William Plumer Fowler noted the parallel, but he failed to recognize its full significance, since he lacked access to EEBO.
3. “Shakespeare and Freudian Interpretations,” *American Imago* 16:3, 225–229.
4. Richard M. Waugaman, “A 1578 Poem about de Vere’s Trip to Italy.” *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* 51:2. 1, 27–32.

